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ABSTRACT

This study examined methods of identifying children who display patterns of inhibited behavior in novel social situations or who appear anxious-withdrawn in their habitual preschool environment. Subjects were 118 children of French-Canadian background recruited from 60 preschool classrooms around Montreal, Canada. Children ranged in age from 31 to 70 months with a mean age of 46.1 months. Based on teacher ratings, children were divided into four groups (socially competent, average, angry-aggressive, or anxious-withdrawn) and were videotaped in interaction with their mothers and an unfamiliar mother-child dyad during an informal social encounter. Children classified as inhibited or sociable were compared on a series of measures derived from factor analysis of discrete behavioral variables. Analysis showed no relation between inhibition in novel social situations and anxious-withdrawn behavior in the child's preschool environment. Results also showed that maternal behavior was coherently related to the child's social withdrawal. Mothers of sociable children were significantly more likely to encourage their child by approval, to be more expressive with their child, and to command their child more often than mothers of inhibited children. (MM)

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Are anxious-withdrawn preschoolers inhibited to novel social situations?

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Abstract

Two theoretical perspectives may be invoked to explain social withdrawal in early childhood. The first casts the concept of behavioral inhibition toward the unfamiliar as a temperamental predisposition with temporal stability, and situational consistency. The second concerns the quality of adaptation of the child to his habitual environment and suggests that social withdrawal arises from mother-child or child-child relationships. In the present study, no relation was found between inhibition in novel social situations and anxious-withdrawn behavior in the child's preschool environment. We view this result as confirmation of the conceptual distinction between an initial response to the unfamiliar and the habitual response to the everyday environment. The finding that maternal behavior was coherently related to the child's social withdrawal suggests that exogenous as well as endogenous factors are involved.

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Introduction

Two theoretical and methodological traditions emerged to explain social withdrawal. Kagan (1989) suggested the concept of behavioral inhibition. About 10-20% of children are inhibited because they show a pattern of restraint and avoidance in the presence of unfamiliar people, places, and objects (Kagan 1989; Robinson, Kagan & Corley, 1992); this inhibition is moderately stable from 14 months to 7 1/2 years (Kagan, Reznick, Snidman, Gibbons & Johnson, 1988; Kagan, Reznick & Gibbons, 1989), and would be a temperamental predisposition (under genetic control) (Garcia-Coll, Kagan & Reznick, 1984; Kagan, 1989; Kagan, Reznick, Clarke, Snidman & Garcia-Coll, 1984; Robinson, Kagan & Corley, 1992). Moreover, children classed at 21 months were more isolated, withdrawn, and quiet than uninhibited children when they were observed in their kindergarten classrooms at 5 1/2 years of age (Kagan, 1989; Reznick et al., 1986).

The second tradition concerns the adaptation of child to his social environment and has established links between social withdrawal and interactions with parents or peers. Longitudinal studies show that secure attachment is associated with positive adaptation of preschool children. Insecure attachment to the mother in infancy has been identified as one predictor of later preschool behavior problems, including anxiety, high dependency on adults, social

withdrawal, passivity, submissiveness with peers and internalizing symptoms in general (Erickson, Sroufe & Egeland, 1985; LaFrenière & Sroufe, 1985; Lewis et al., 1984; Sroufe, Fox & Pancake, 1983; Turner, 1991). Finally, Asendorpf.(1990, 1991) and other researchers showed that low peer acceptance contributes to young children's inhibition in peer groups.

The objective of this study was to compare two distinct methods for identifying children who display a pattern of inhibited behavior in novel social situations or who appear to be anxious-withdrawn in their habitual preschool environment. A high congruence between these two different situations should confirm the genetic model, and an absence of congruence should lead us to use the transactional model implying that children's predispositions can be transformed by the social environment.

Method

Subjects

A sample of 118 children (66 girls, 52 boys) were selected from a large representative sample of 994 children of French-Canadian background recruited from 60 different preschool classrooms in the Montreal metropolitan area. Children ranged in age from 31 to 70 months, with a mean age of 46.1 months.

Procedure

Four groups of preschoolers (N=30 in each group) identified on the basis of teacher ratings using the Preschool Socio-Affective Profile (PSP: LaFrenière & Dumas, 1992) as socially competent, average, angry-aggressive or anxious-withdrawn were observed in interaction with their mothers and an unfamiliar mother-child dyad during an informal social encounter. The social situation was filmed and consisted of a 15 minute snack time which was later decoded by a team of 4 trained observers; observer agreement averaged 81% across all categories. Children were matched on the basis of gender, PSP classification and age (within 12 months).

In order to assess the dimension of inhibition-sociability, a composite index was computed that consisted of the mean of three interrelated standardized scores: 1- INITIATION (frequency of initiated social interaction directed from the focal child to peer) ($r=-.65$ and $r=-.27$ respectively with the next two variables, $p<.01$), 2- LATENCY (for focal child to verbalize toward peer) ($r=.33$ with the next one, $p<.01$), and 3- PASSIVITY (percentage of time child remained inactive).

Results

A oneway analysis of variance was conducted with PSP as the grouping variable and the composite index of social inhibition as the dependent variable revealing no main effect of PSP group ($F(3, 114)= 1.22$, $p>.30$).

For analytic purposes, subjects were classified as "inhibited" if all three scores were below the mean (N=28) or "sociable" if all three scores were above the mean (N=29). The other children (51.7%) had intermediate positions on the inhibition-sociability scale.

Children classified as inhibited or sociable were compared on a series of measures derived from factor analysis (see TABLES 1, 2, and 3) of the discrete behavioral variables, according the transmitter-receiver type. The TABLE 4 show that mothers of sociable children were found to be significantly more likely to encourage their child by approval, to be more expressive with their child and to command him more often than mothers of inhibited children (Table 4). In addition, children classed as inhibited approached their mother and touched her more often than sociable children, suggesting their orientation towards her as a secure base. Children who were classed as sociable with peer were found to verbally communicate more often with their own mother, including negativism (Table 4). Finally, inhibited children had a higher latency to verbalize to their mother (Mann-Whitney U=278.0,

$z=-2.04$, $p<.05$), although this latency is lesser than the latency to verbalize to the other child in the two groups (Wilcoxon, inhibited: $z=-4.49$, sociable: $z=-3.28$, $p<.01$).

Discussion

The congruence hypothesis was not confirmed by our results. Inhibited children in a novel situation were not anxious-withdrawn in their habitual preschool environment. This result is a confirmation of the conceptual distinction between an initial response to the unfamiliar and the habitual response to the everyday environment. Moreover, the finding that maternal behavior was coherently related to the child's social inhibition suggests that it is premature to consider such behavior as endogenous to the child. The behavior of sociable children could be attributed to the expressive behaviors and encouragements from their mother. But here we can not demonstrate this causal relation, and the opposite is possible.

Because latency to interact with the mother was always shorter than latency to interact with the child, it seems that all children were midly "intimidated" in this novel social situation. But inhibited children more often used the mother as secure base to explore environment, like young children.

Finally, the exclusive presence of two positive factors (prosocial and communication), and the absence of aggressive or aversive categories during this novel social

situation provide a means for the child "to get to know" a peer after a short period of passive observation of the unfamiliar peer.

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TABLE 1- Factor structure of behaviors between children

Categories	FACTORS PROSOCIALITY	COMMUNICATION
active play	0,83	
positive facial expressions	0,75	
vocalisation	0,69	
questions		0,80
imitation		0.69
verbalisation	0,52	0,63
% of the Variance	48,3%	18,3%
Eigenvalue	2,898	1,097

TABLE 2- Factor structure of child's behaviors toward his mother

Categories	FACTORS PROXIMITY	COMMUNIC.	NEGATIVE VOC.	EXPRESSION	COOPERATION
removal	0,87				
approach	0,84				
touch	0,58				
questions		0,81			
moan		0,78			
verbalisation		0,57			
attract attention			0,83		
opposition			0,83		
positive facial expression				0,88	
gesture				0,68	
cooperation					0,87
request					0,46
% of the Variance	21,0%	16,6%	11,1%	9,4%	9,3%
Eigenvalue	2,520	1,986	1,331	1,131	1,110

TABLE 3- Factor structure of mother's behaviors toward her child

Categories	FACTORS				
	COMMUNIC.	ENCOURAG.	EXPRESSION	COOPERATION	COMMAND
communication	0,84				
physical control	0,80				
disapproval/ telling off	0,57				0,47
approval		0,74			
recommendation		0,72			
attract attention			0,80		
gesture		0,46	0,71		
cooperation				0,79	
affiliation				0,68	
questions/ request				0,57	
commanding					0,81
% of the Variance	22,3%	16,5%	10,3%	9,6%	8,4%
Eigenvalue	2,677	1,978	1,231	1,151	1,009

TABLE 4- Means and standard deviations of factors between inhibited and sociable children

Categories	Inhibited children	Sociable children	t(55)
Mother → Child			
encouragement	0,68 (1,34)	2,07 (2,39)	2,67*
expression	0,89 (1,10)	2,45 (2,80)	2,74**
command	0,93 (1,41)	2,45 (3,67)	2,05*
control	0,57 (0,84)	1,38 (2,23)	1,80@
cooperation	1,68 (2,48)	1,21 (1,47)	0,88
Child → Mother			
proximity	2,85 (3,30)	1,10 (1,54)	2,59*
communication	7,00 (5,26)	10,72 (7,63)	2,14*
negativism	0,89 (1,29)	2,83 (3,66)	2,65*
expression	4,75 (4,52)	4,10 (3,69)	0,59
coopération	0,82 (1,06)	0,79 (0,73)	0,12

* $p<0,05$
** $p<0,01$
@ $p=0,076$